

Birdshooting Season

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Birdshooting season the men
make marriages with their guns

Analysis: The metaphor "make marriages with their guns" immediately establishes the poem's central preoccupation with gender. The men form an intimate, almost sacred bond with their weapons, and the language of marriage implies that for the duration of this season the guns have displaced the women. The title line runs directly into the first two lines without punctuation, as if the season and the men's behaviour are simply the same thing. The alliteration of men, make, marriages, and macho in the next line ties these words together and underlines how thoroughly the space is about to be defined by masculinity.

My father's house turns macho
as from far the hunters gather

Analysis: The house belongs to the father, not the mother: ownership and authority are male from the outset. The personification "turns macho" gives the house itself a masculine identity, as if the building absorbs the energy of the men filling it. The gathering of hunters from far reinforces the sense of ritual, a ceremony that draws men together and consolidates their collective identity. Hunting is presented from the start as a male vocation, something that happens in the father's house, among men who travel to be there.

All night long contentless women
stir their brews: hot coffee
chocolata, cerassie

Analysis: Contentless is one of the poem's most important words. To be content is to be satisfied; these women are its opposite. They are not openly rebellious but they are not willing either. The detail "all night long" establishes that they are exhausted and that their labour is relentless. The listing of the brews, hot coffee, chocolata, cerassie, is not decorative: it shows the volume of what the women are producing, item by item through the night. The Jamaican and Caribbean specificity of the items grounds the poem in a particular culture while also showing that this labour is skilled and local knowledge, not mere domestic drudgery.

wrap pone and tie-leaf
for tomorrow's sport. Tonight
the men drink white rum neat.

Analysis: The word sport is quietly devastating. All the women's overnight work exists to fuel something the poem dismisses as a game. The contrast between the two stanzas is stark: the women stir and wrap and prepare through the night while the men drink white rum neat, straight from the bottle, undiluted. The placement of "tonight" and "the men drink white rum neat" at the end of the long stanza of women's labour makes the imbalance impossible to ignore. The men are celebrating; the women are serving them without being invited to celebrate.

In darkness shouldering
their packs, their guns, they leave

Analysis: The men's departure is framed in the language of soldiers moving out: darkness, packs, guns, leaving. The image is almost military in its terseness. The word shouldering is worth noting: to shoulder something means to take on a burden or responsibility, yet what the men are shouldering is a sport. The irony is quiet but present: they treat their departure as if it were a noble duty, when the poem has already shown us who did the actual labour. The brevity of this stanza enacts the same irony in form: the men simply get up and go, indifferent to the night the women spent preparing for them.

We stand quietly on the
doorstep shivering.

Analysis: The we is the poem's speaker and the children, positioned on the threshold between inside and outside, belonging fully to neither world. The metaphor of quietness here suggests more than silence: the women and children watching cannot speak out. Their dissatisfaction has no permitted voice. Shivering is literal cold and early morning darkness, but it also carries the weight of vulnerability, of being left behind in the chill while the men move forward into their season.

Little boys
longing to grow up birdhunters too

Analysis: The boys have already absorbed the lesson. They do not question the division; they desire to be on the other side of it. The enjambment isolates "little boys" before the longing is named, and the word too confirms that they see themselves as future versions of the men who just left. The gender roles will be inherited, not chosen, passed down through aspiration before the boys are old enough to examine them.

Little girls whispering
Fly Birds Fly.

Analysis: The girls do not long to join the hunters. They whisper, the quietest possible form of speech, a voice not quite permitted to exist above the threshold of a murmur, which mirrors the women's enforced silence. "Fly Birds Fly" functions as symbolism: the birds are also the women, and the girls are urging them toward freedom. That the girls identify with the prey rather than the hunters is the poem's final and most pointed observation about how early people learn which side of power they occupy. The phrase is also structured as a chant or prayer, its capital letters giving it a weight beyond a child's whisper.

About the poem

Author: Olive Senior (1941--)

Context: Set in the Caribbean, most likely Jamaica, during the bird shooting season that falls around August or September. Senior is a Jamaican writer and the poem draws on the specific foods, drinks, and cultural rituals of the region. The poem describes a single night before the hunt, not the hunting itself: the preparations, the departures, and the children left watching from the doorstep.

Form: Four stanzas of unequal length. The second stanza, which covers the women's labour, is the longest in the poem. The third stanza, which covers the men's departure, is the shortest.

The form mirrors the content: the women spend the whole night working while the men simply get up and leave. The lack of a closing punctuation and the abruptness of the final line give the poem an open, unresolved quality.

Core idea: Bird shooting season is a lens through which the poem examines how gender roles are enforced, sustained, and inherited. The men hunt; the women serve; the boys long to hunt; the girls whisper for the birds to escape. The cycle continues before anyone chooses it.

Mood: Reflective and quietly uneasy, with an undercurrent of suppressed frustration.

Tone: Understated and observational, with irony just beneath the surface.

Main themes:

- Gender roles and their enforcement
- Masculinity and dominance
- Cultural tradition as a vehicle for inequality
- Childhood socialisation and inherited roles
- Voicelessness and suppressed dissatisfaction
- Empathy vs violence (girls vs boys)

Remember

- The **birds may symbolise the women**: the men shoot (oppress) them, and the girls whisper for them to escape
- **"Contentless"** is the key word for the women's emotional state: not openly resistant, but distinctly not willing
- **Form mirrors content**: long stanza for women's labour, short stanza for men's effortless departure
- The **boys long to join** the hunters; the **girls whisper for the birds to fly**: gender roles are already internalised before adulthood
- **"Shouldering"** is **ironic**: it implies bearing a great burden or responsibility, but the men are shouldering a sport
- **"Tomorrow's sport"** trivialises the hunting that the women's entire night of work exists to support
- The **speaker is on the doorstep** with the children: not a hunter, and not given a clear gender, which keeps the poem's perspective deliberately ambiguous